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From Agca to Andropov

The chain of suspicion needs to be tested in court

The possibility that the late Yuri Andropov conspired to shoot the Pope in St Peter's Square in 1981 can no longer be left to the realm of gossip, leaks and innuendo. For most people, the idea is almost inconceivable, and the supposed evidence leading from the gun-holding Mehmet Ali Agca to the then head of the KGB is of a notoriously suspect kind. The CIA is said to be among the pooh-poohers, either from genuine scepticism or for superpower reasons of state. Nevertheless, after three years, the Italian judicial process has lumberingly brought its investigation to a point where the question cannot be swept under the rug. The "Bulgarian connection", which implies the Andropov connection, has to be examined in open court.

In a report which has been partly leaked to the press, the state prosecutor, Mr Antonio Albano, has called for the indictment and trial of four of Agca's alleged Turkish co-conspirators plus three Bulgarians, one of whom is in custody in Italy (the other two escaped under diplomatic immunity to Bulgaria). That does not automatically mean a trial; the final decision rests with the investigating magistrate, Judge Ilario Martellà. But Judge Martella now has little choice. The finger of accusation has been pointed, and without a trial will remain pointed. The defence has to be given its chance to demolish the accusation.

The main question for the trial is whether Agca knew things about the Bulgarians he says were in the plot to kill the Pope which he could not have known unless his claim is true. The evidence against the Bulgarians is based on Agca's testimony. That is, in principle, worrying; it is doubly worrying because Agca has retracted, and then partly dis-retracted, some of his evidence. But corroboration may be possible. Agca has told the investigators a number of things about the Bulgarians—details of their appearance and habits, of their families, of the places where he met them—which, in the state prosecutor's view, mean he must have known them well. This is the heart of the matter. Did Agca have a working relationship with the Bulgarians?

Even if the Bulgarian connection is established, the other links in the chain leading to Moscow are less than certain; but at each stage the uncertainty diminishes. The three Bulgarians—two embassy people and an airline official—may not have been the secret service men the state prosecutor says they were; but why would three ordinary apparatchiks have got involved with a wild man known to have committed murder in Turkey? If they were secret service men, their original business with Agca may have been the guns-and-drug-smuggling racket that had been going on between Bulgaria and Turkey; but could they have stayed ignorant of Agca's plans for the Pope? It is hardly likely, if they did know of his assassination plan, that they would not have told their superiors in Sofia. It is well nigh unimaginable that Sofia would not have told Moscow—that is, the KGB, then commanded by Yuri Andropov.

The trial, assuming it takes place, will concentrate on the Bulgarians' part; that is as far as Agca's allegations reach. The world will be left to draw its own conclusions about whether there was a Russian part, at a time when Moscow feared the influence of this Polish Pope on Solidarity's rising. The state prosecutor has made a prima facie case against the Bulgarians. His case should be tested by the normal process of law. The question of whether the Pope was shot by a Turkish fanatic, or an international conspiracy, is too important to be left in its present judicial limbo.